

U.S.-MEXICO EDUCATION EXCHANGE: CHALLENGES FOR COOPERATION

by **Dolia Estévez**

The *Fall 2007 International Student Enrollment Survey*, published by the Institute of International Education (IIE), suggests a possible turning point in a trend that has, for the past three years, shown a decline in international student enrollments at U.S. colleges and universities. For the first time since the 2001/02 academic year, there was a 3.2% growth in 2006/07. Students from Mexico, however, were not part of this shift. According to *Open Doors 2007: Report on International Education Exchange*, published by IIE with support from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 13,826 students from Mexico --2.4% of the total U.S. foreign student population-- enrolled in American universities in 2006/07, a 0.8% drop over the previous year. While the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) had a notable impact on bilateral education exchange, driving the number of Mexican students in U.S. universities from 9,003 in 1994/95 to the current figures, Mexican enrollment has remained almost flat since 2003/04 (see Chart1). In 2006/007, Mexico ranked seventh behind India, China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Canada in countries with the highest number of students in the United States (see Chart2).

On November 15, 2007, the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute and the Mexico-U.S. Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange (Comexus) brought together a binational group of academics, specialists, government officials and diplomats to discuss this issue. Participants agreed that Mexico is failing to use its geographic proximity and intense bilateral relationship with the United States as an advantage for increasing the number of students in American universities.

In his welcoming remarks, Mexico Institute Director **Andrew Selee** emphasized the importance of educational exchange as a means for developing a common language to address the many pressing issues the United States and Mexico share. He stressed that cultural and educational exchange is an important component in creating the basis for citizens in both countries to understand common challenges. Education exchange, he said, is a critical link that is not often taken into consideration in policy making.

Comexus Executive Director **Arturo Borja** found it paradoxical that despite being a close neighbor and having a complex and diverse agenda with the United States, Mexico lags behind other countries in educational exchange. Comexus was created in 1990 by the U.S. and Mexican governments to administer the Fulbright-García Robles scholarly program and give selected students on both sides of the border the opportunity to attend universities in the other country. Comexus believes that individuals with international experience become important instruments for cementing and furthering the bilateral relationship. Between 1991 and 2007, Comexus gave 2,474 new grants: 1,386 to Mexican students and 1,088 to U.S. students. Despite a five year ascending trend, scholarships dropped from 188 to 142 between 2001 and 2005. Borja attributed this decline to a 2002 policy decision by Comexus which, consistent with the Fulbright tradition of emphasizing quality over quantity, increased the amount of money per grant, consequently reducing the number of grantees. In 2007, new grants were up again to 165 (see Chart3).

In his opening remarks, Mexican Ambassador **Arturo Sarukhan** said that there are few issues in the bilateral relationship as important as education. Cultural and educational exchange, he stressed, have always played a key role in building bridges between our two nations through scholarships and grants, as well as exchange programs involving teachers, researchers and professors. He noted that over the past decade there has been increased interest in academic circles and within the educational establishment on both sides of the border. This has led to the emergence of new think tanks and the restructuring of school syllabi which has allowed new generations of Mexicans and Americans to grow up with a better understanding of who their neighbor is. Many Fulbright grantees, himself included, played a “pivotal role” in the change that took place in Mexico in the early 1990s in terms of how Mexicans understood the imperatives of the relationship. Ambassador Sarukhan suggested that this understanding of the relationship, and the subsequent creation of NAFTA, was predicated on the unique strength of educational exchange.

The Department of State’s Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Ambassador **Craig Kelly**, agreed that education is perhaps the most important asset that governments should invest in for the future of the bilateral relationship. He referred to the Fulbright grants and the International Visitors Leadership Program, run by the Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, as “programs that pay off.” In describing educational exchanges as the day to day *de facto* integration that is occurring between the two countries, Ambassador Kelly argued that to tell teachers and students that they are the true diplomats is not a cliché, it’s a fact.

Two panels followed. The first one, **Public Policies to Support Educational Cooperation**, was moderated by General Director for Cultural Affairs of Mexico’s Secretary of Foreign Relations **Alberto Fierro**. Panelists included: ITAM’s Director for International Studies, **Rafael Fernández de Castro**; American University’s Dean of the School of International Service, **Louis Goodman**; Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico’s (UNAM) Research Center on North American Studies Professor, **Nattie Golubov**; and Senior Advisor to the Deputy Secretary of State, **Robert Earle**.

Panel II, **Educational Exchange: What More Can We Do?**, was moderated by the chief of the Fulbright Program for Western Hemisphere **Cynthia Wolloch**, and included University of Arizona’s Executive Director for North American Higher Education Collaboration, **Francisco Marmolejo**; University of Monterrey’s Professor **Juan Carlos Silas**; and University of Texas-El Paso’s Center for Inter-American and Border Studies Executive Director **Ricardo Blazquez**. Panelists discussed why Mexico is lagging behind countries such as India and China in sending students to U.S. universities; identified obstacles that prevent more student mobility; and addressed the need to invigorate bilateral institutional exchange for students.

A CASE OF WASTED OPPORTUNITY?

Mexico is the United States’ third largest trading partner after Canada and China. It is the second market for U.S. exports and the third source for imports to the United States. Yet this economic interdependence is not reflected as strongly in educational exchange. According to *Open Doors 2007*, 57.8% of the less than 14,000 Mexican students enrolled in the U.S. are undergraduates, and only 31.2% are graduate students. The opposite is the case for India and China, with 71.1% of India’s 83,833 and 70.8% of China’s 67,723 students in the U.S. pursuing graduate studies.

The Indian government does not spend significant amounts of money on scholarships. Jane E. Schuloske, Executive Director of the U.S. Educational Foundation, is quoted in *Open Doors 2007* saying Indians can find the resources to study in the U.S. through scholarships, student loans, campus jobs and family funds. The reason why the U.S. is the prime destination for Indian students, she added, is because employers in India stress the importance of a workforce equipped with adequate technical, teamwork and communications skills and Indian families know that American education provides these skills and the confidence needed to succeed.

Rafael Fernández de Castro explained that the United States is the top destination for Indian students due to the contribution of U.S. higher education in achieving global competitiveness; the large number of well-trained students seeking top academic placements; U.S. universities operating through competition and demanding the best students available; and the presence of well-established networks in key U.S. universities willing to take more students. In contrast, Mexico's higher education performance is not competitive by world standards. According to the *OECD Factbook 2007*, in 2004, the most recent figure available, the OECD average tertiary attainment (higher education) for age group 25-64 was 25.2 %. With a tertiary attainment of merely 16.4%, Mexico was the sixth worst case among the 30 OECD countries.

Mexican students also have a language disadvantage *vis a vis* their Indian counterparts. In times when English is the *lingua franca* of higher education, English as a second language is not a priority either in Mexican public or private schools. This language impediment undercuts the ability to take highly-skilled jobs available in the U.S. labor market. In addition, the Bush Administration's unpopular post-9/11 foreign policy has further discouraged Mexican students from attending U.S. institutions.

What should be done to increase educational exchange between the United States and Mexico is the subject of an ongoing bilateral debate. Should Mexicans try to replicate the Indian model? That is, prepare enough overachievers so they "spill over" into the U.S. like current Mexican immigrants do? Fernández de Castro believes they should. However, in the short-term, he proposed that Mexico and the U.S. seek to negotiate a bilateral initiative to significantly increase the number of Mexicans in U.S. graduate programs and the number of Americans in Mexican higher education institutions. Experience suggests that few things are more valuable in improving mutual understanding than training Mexicans in U.S. universities.

STUDENT MOBILITY

Student mobility has increased worldwide in recent years. In 2006, UNESCO estimated that over 2.5 million students were being educated at the tertiary level in countries other than their homes, up from an estimated 1.7 million in 2000. A report from IDP Education Australia predicted that by 2025, almost eight million students will be educated transnationally. Yet, in Mexico, less than 1% of undergraduate and postgraduate students study abroad. According to IIE's *Atlas of Student Mobility*, 18,688 out of 2,236,791 tertiary Mexican enrollments in 2004 studied abroad; the vast majority, 13,063 students, in the United States. Other common destinations for Mexican students included the United Kingdom, with 1,973 students; France, with 1,452; Germany, with 977, and Spain, with 937.

Nattie Golubov believes that the lack of information provided to students about programs offering funding and other resources is the primary problem for the lack of student mobility of students from UNAM to the United States. This prevents the 180,000 undergraduate and

graduate students currently enrolled at UNAM, the largest and most prestigious public university in Latin America, from taking full advantage of available exchange programs and scholarships.

Other obstacles that Mexican students from public universities face when deciding to study in the U.S. include: lack of adequate financial resources, lack of English skills and post 9/11 immigration policies that make it more difficult to get student visas. The Graduate Record Examinations, GRE (an aptitude test for foreign students) creates another impediment, not only because of its cost, but also because students from foreign institutions tend to have a lower grade point average (GPA) because English is not their first language. Most of the responding institutions in the IIE's *Fall 2007 International Student Enrollment Survey* cited delays and denials in visa application processes as the major reason for a decline in enrollment. The second factor was the cost of tuition and fees at U.S. host institutions.

Higher levels of worldwide student mobility are also a result of a stronger effort to recruit international students. Francisco Marmolejo noted that as the world becomes more global, we are witnessing increasingly aggressive recruitment processes from foreign institutions in Latin America. Golubov reported that universities from as far away as China and Australia organize information fairs at UNAM, the only university in Latin America to be ranked by Britain's *Times Higher Education Supplement* in the top 200 in the world, often offering generous financial packages to students interested in studying in their countries. As a result, there is a growing interest in learning languages other than English such as Chinese, Japanese and Arabic.

Despite the geographic advantage and traditional ties with the United States, Latin America is not the main focus of American universities' recruitment efforts. The *Fall 2007 International Student Enrollment Survey* reported that institutions that have developed more resources for international student recruitment trips seem to have concentrated mainly in Asia. Twenty-five percent of responding institutions specifically devoted resources to recruit students from China, followed by Korea, India and Japan. An additional 18% reported having focused more resources "on other countries in Asia."

AMERICAN STUDENTS IN MEXICO

American students studying abroad have traditionally helped improve America's image and standing in the world. This is becoming more significant as anti-American sentiment has intensified in many parts of the world. Further, Americans studying abroad often bring back with them an understanding of other cultures that aids in changing stereotypical perceptions people in the U.S. have of other countries. For these students, many of whom will become the professionals of the future, knowing other countries from the inside can help reduce tensions and promote mutual respect between the U.S. and those nations. Many institutions encourage students to seek foreign experiences. American University's Louis Goodman reported that his school sends between 400 to 500 students abroad every year.

Mexico is the first destination in the Western Hemisphere and the sixth in the world for U.S. students studying abroad, but the numbers are small. According to *Open Doors 2007*, in 2005/06, only 10,000 U.S. students were enrolled in Mexican institutions, compared to 32,000 in the U.K. Yet, as part of the record level of Americans studying abroad in 2006/06 (223,534 students, an 8.5% increase over the previous academic year), U.S. students in Mexico also increased by 8.4%. The number of American students receiving academic credit for their study abroad has increased 150% in the past decade, from fewer than 90,000 in 1995/96. With 58.3% of all U.S. students studying abroad in the 2005/06 school year, Europe was the number one destination, distantly followed by Latin America, with 15.2 %.

Why Mexico is not a more preferable choice has little to do with money or visas, and more with seeing Mexico as too close to home and not sophisticated enough. Dr. Goodman said that they have a “terrible time” convincing students to go to Mexico. University of Monterrey’s Juan Carlos Silas offered some insights into why Mexico is not as attractive as other places: some students don’t feel welcome and perceive disrespect, and others don’t feel that attending Mexican institutions is important for their job prospects.

One way to stimulate further interest is through institutional exchanges. Presently, Goodman reported, only five Mexican elite institutions have written agreements on student exchange with U.S. counterparts: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), Colegio de México (Colmex), Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), the Tecnológico de Monterrey and the Universidad de las Américas-Puebla (UDLAP).

Rafael Fernández de Castro stressed the role institutions play in meeting the challenges of cooperation and said that one of the problems with NAFTA was its inability to create more bilateral institutions. He argued that Comexus has survived because it was institutionalized by becoming a Commission. Panelists expressed concern about the negative impact that the immigration debate, with its anti-Mexican undertones, is having in almost all aspects of U.S.-Mexican relations. Robert Earle said that once the immigration issue is resolved, education and cultural exchanges will become central in the bilateral agenda again. At that point, he predicted, a lot of “NAFTA-style energy” will be released and Mexico and the United States will experience “another supernova of excitement.”

Country Background: MEXICO
Educational Exchange with Mexico for 2006/07

Year	# of Students from Mexico	% of Total Foreign Students in US	# of US Study Abroad Students Going to Mexico
2006/07	13,826	2.4%	n/a
2005/06	13,931	2.5%	10,022 (up 8.4%)
2004/05	13,063	2.3%	9,247
2003/04	13,329	2.3%	9,293
2002/03	12,801	2.2%	8,775
2001/02	12,518	2.1%	8,078
2000/01	10,670	1.9%	8,360
1999/00	10,607	2.1%	7,374
1998/99	9,641	2.0%	7,363
1997/98	9,559	2.0%	7,574
1996/97	8,975	2.0%	6,685
1995/96	8,687	1.9%	6,220
1994/95	9,003	2.0%	4,715

Source: Open Doors 2007 **INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION**

Country Background: MEXICO
Educational Exchange with Mexico for 2006/07

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Leading Countries of Origin
LEADING PLACES OF ORIGIN

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Open Doors 2007
Report on International Educational Exchange

Figure 2A
TOP 20 LEADING PLACES OF ORIGIN OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, 2005/06 & 2006/07

Rank	Place of Origin	2005/06	2006/07	2006/07 % of Int'l Total	% Change
	WORLD TOTAL	564,766	582,984	-	3.2
1	India	76,503	83,833	14.4	9.6
2	China, PRC	62,582	67,723	11.6	8.2
3	Korea, Rep. of (South)	59,022	62,392	10.7	5.7
4	Japan	38,712	35,282	6.1	-8.9
5	Taiwan	27,876	29,094	5.0	4.4
6	Canada	28,202	28,280	4.9	0.3
7	Mexico	13,931	13,826	2.4	-0.8
8	Turkey	11,622	11,506	2.0	-1.0
9	Thailand	8,765	8,886	1.5	1.4
10	Germany	8,829	8,656	1.5	-2.0
11	United Kingdom	8,274	8,438	1.4	2.0
12	Saudi Arabia	3,448	7,886	1.4	128.7
13	Nepal	6,061	7,754	1.3	27.9
14	Hong Kong, China	7,849	7,722	1.3	-1.6
15	Indonesia	7,575	7,338	1.3	-3.1
16	Brazil	7,009	7,126	1.2	1.7
17	Colombia	6,835	6,750	1.2	-1.2
18	France	6,640	6,704	1.1	1.0
19	Kenya	6,559	6,349	1.1	-3.2
20	Vietnam	4,597	6,036	1.0	31.3

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Becas Nuevas excluyendo Programas de Verano 1991-2007

Total = 2,474

